

Team Teaching in Japanese Elementary Schools: Did anything change in 2020?

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the changes made to English education in elementary schools in Osaka, Japan during 2020 due to changes made by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology - Japan, and whether those changes had a positive effect on the quality of team teaching in the elementary school classroom. In addition, the effectiveness of team teaching, its importance, and further changes necessary in order for a successful team teaching environment to occur are all discussed. The conclusion states that while some teachers have improved slightly on an individual basis, more training is necessary for both Japanese homeroom teachers and English-speaking Assistant Language Teachers in order for team teaching to be conducted more properly in public schools nationwide. Despite changes in the 2020 curriculum giving 5th and 6th grade homeroom teachers more English teaching responsibility, the increased amount of English classes has not resulted in a significant improvement in the quality of team teaching, but has led to some Japanese teachers taking a more active role in the class.

Keywords: Team teaching, Elementary school, Homeroom Teacher, HRT, MEXT, ESL, Assistant Language Teacher, ALT

Assistant Language Teachers (ALT) first arrived in Japan in large numbers after the launch of the JET Programme, which first sent 813 ALTs to Japan in 1987 (JET Programme History, 2019). An ALT's main job, as described by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) is to follow the instructions of the Japanese teacher by doing things such as model reading, explaining things in English, communicating in natural English with students, and cultural exchange (MEXT, 2011). In order for an ALT to properly function in an elementary school classroom, a Japanese Homeroom Teacher (HRT) must be present. When an ALT and an HRT or Japanese Teacher of English (JTE) work together in the classroom to conduct English classes, this is called “Team Teaching.” This paper examines the purpose of team teaching and the effect it has on students. Team teaching refers to the idea that the roles of the HRT and ALT are not T1 (lead teacher) and T2 (assistant teacher), but rather T1A and T1B, in which both teachers act together as a lead teacher, with both teachers carrying an equal level of responsibility and leadership in the classroom. However, there are other ways that team-teaching can be conducted successfully that are different from the standard T1 and T2 pattern as well as the T1A and T1B, if done properly. In 2017, MEXT proposed a change to the amount of Foreign Language Instruction hours taught at public elementary schools in their “New Course of Study in Foreign Language Education Plan” (文部科学省, 2017) to be implemented starting in the 2018 school year. Up until 2017, the required hours for Foreign Language Instruction for 5th and 6th graders was 35 hours per year,

which is equivalent to one class per week. 4th graders and younger had 0 hours dedicated to Foreign Language Instruction. The plan involved raising the hours of Foreign Language Instruction from 35 hours to 50 hours in 2018 and 2019 for 5th and 6th graders. In addition, 3rd and 4th graders would each gain 15 hours per year of Foreign Language Instruction during these two years. The increase of classroom hours in 2018 and 2019 were meant to be a transition period for the eventual 2020 plan, which further increases the amount of hours studied in elementary school. In the 2020 plan, 5th and 6th graders will study 70 hours a week, which is equivalent to roughly 2 classes per week. 3rd and 4th graders classroom hours will increase from 15 to 35 as well. New textbooks were also created in order to accompany the change in class hours. These textbooks provide more content than previous years and focus on teaching students how to convey information about themselves, their opinions, and asking questions to others.

Another major change with the New Course of Study in Foreign Language Education Plan is that the subject name changes from “Foreign Language Activities” to “English” as a formal assessed subject for the 5th and 6th graders. Up until 2020, there was no formal assessment for elementary school 5th and 6th grade Foreign Language Instruction, and was assessed as a pass or fail subject. These changes are significant for team teaching for two major reasons. First, Assistant Language teachers are not able to teach all of the elementary school classes anymore. The homeroom teacher must be able to teach English to their students without the help of a dedicated English teacher. Second, the homeroom teachers are now responsible for assessing their students in a meaningful way. This increased focus on English education in elementary school should theoretically increase the English teaching ability of homeroom teachers across the country, regardless of their actual English level. According to Aline & Hosoda (2003), there are four main roles that an HRT typically plays in the classroom. The first role is called the bystander role, which involves the HRT standing at the back or side of the room for a passive effect. This is generally a negative thing when the HRT does not participate or make attempts to join in the class. Students often look up to the HRT as a role model, and can view the HRTs lack of participation as a sign that English is not interesting or necessary. It also makes it difficult for the ALT to talk to them and demonstrate communication in front of the students. However, when they interject at times when the ALT is in trouble, such as to assist in ordering an out-of-control class, or by helping individual students, then they can play an important role that would benefit students that may not get help they need without the homeroom teacher nearby.

The second main role an HRT can play is called the translator role, which involves translating the ALT's English into Japanese. This can be beneficial when the instructions are too difficult and the students find themselves confused and frustrated. It can be used as a way to save time as well, allowing more times for the main activities to be conducted. However, when students show an understanding of the English used by the ALT, then a translation is not necessary. In addition, when this is overused, students will not make attempts to listen and understand to the English when they know the translation is coming.

The third main role an HRT can play is of a co-learner. This is a role that can be useful for an HRT with a low level of English, as they can be the role of an ideal learner, giving students an image of how they should act. However, if the students become too dependent on the HRT for learning how to act, it can stunt their own learning process. The fourth and final main role an HRT can play is a co-teacher role. The HRT knows the students, and will call on them to answer, and stands in the front of the class with the ALT.

They will converse with the ALT and both teachers will use their teaching skills to teach students in an effective manner that combines both teachers' strong points. However, when teachers have conflicting ideas, difficulties can arise in the classroom. While the co-teacher role is often seen as the most ideal role, if done properly, the other roles may also have beneficial effects in the classroom. The important takeaway is that as long as the HRT and the ALT work together properly and understand what role works in their classroom, then team teaching can be achievable.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study are as follows:

1. Is there a noticeable difference in the quality of elementary school 5th and 6th grade team teaching in 2020 compared to previous years?
2. What steps can be taken to increase team teaching competency among elementary school 5th and 6th grade homeroom teachers and ALTs?

The first research question is in regards to one of the big issues that ALTs face when teaching elementary school English at the 5th and 6th grade level. There are many cases in which English classes are conducted without actual team teaching taking place, despite both teachers being present in the classroom. In previous years, one issue that is often brought up by ALTs is the lack of team teaching in the elementary school classroom. One ALT interviewed by the author in preparation for this study has said that they have often taught as the sole T1 in the classroom in previous years when teaching 5th and 6th grade. In cases such as these, it is possible that the HRT feels as though English teaching is not their job or responsibility. With the new role that the HRT must play as an English teacher, it is possible that they will have an easier time performing a team teaching role that they are comfortable with, but it is not guaranteed to happen.

The second research question concerns what can be done to increase team teaching competency among the 5th and 6th grade elementary school ALT and HRT relationship? Knowing what team teaching is, and how to properly conduct it is an important part of the process for improving team teaching, but how can this be improved, and what steps should be taken to ensure that both the ALT and the HRT are aware of how to properly team teach? If team teaching is indeed useful, then why are there not more training seminars and importance placed upon it? Team teaching is something that many ALTs are told that they must do, but without any guides or advice beyond opaque suggestions such as "Be flexible."

Current Issues with Team Teaching

There are many obstacles in the way of proper team teaching in the classroom, but the most common issue is an ineffective utilization of the ALT or the HRT (Johannes, 2012). One of the issues is that teachers are sometimes unsure of what role they should assume in the classroom. When the JTE is used to teaching by themselves, they may not feel as though they need the ALT to be in the classroom. There are cases when the Japanese teacher will teach grammar, and then leave a game or other activity to the ALT, with each teacher doing their own separate part rather than working together. This is particularly evident when the ALT speaks Japanese, and the Japanese teacher may feel as though they are not needed when the ALT is leading the class (Mahoney, 2004). If the ALT can translate what they are saying without the help of a Japanese teacher, then the Japanese teacher may feel as though they do not need to fulfill the role of bridging the gap between

the ALT and the students.

According to a study by Tajino and Walker (1998), students expect the JTE to help them when they have difficulty understanding the content of English lessons, which is a role suitable for the JTE due to their own experience going through the Japanese education system. Tajino and Walker (1998) also found that students in the study expected the ALT to teach about communication, grammar, and pronunciation. As a result of these beliefs, students come to view their goal for English acquisition to be the ALT's English, and not the English of the JTE, which represents an impossible goal as native-like pronunciation is simply not attainable by most learners of any language. While students may enjoy the team teaching class, it should be understood by the student that their goal is to speak like the JTE, who is capable of communicating with the ALT, even if imperfectly, rather than the unachievable English of the native speaker.

Ideally, team teaching will involve the cooperation of both members, who have unique backgrounds and different fields of expertise, which can compliment each other to maximize efficiency in the classroom (Carley, 2013). This cooperation can allow the native English speaking teachers to cover language issues that the Japanese teacher might not know as well, and the Japanese teacher can take better control of the classroom, the flow, and other issues that the ALT may encounter if they were to teach alone. In order for this dynamic to succeed, consistency and planning are necessary. When goals are verbalized and discussed, it is possible for these goals to be achieved, as both parties have more of an investment in the lesson and the class (Meerman, 2003). Often, these planned out lessons have interactions and with a combination of both of their efforts, they can respond to the student's needs better than each teacher could do individually.

Method

A survey (Appendix 1) was given to 25 randomly selected elementary school ALTs in Osaka during a company-wide meeting with most of the 130 ALTs present. The survey was given in order to evaluate the differences in teaching this year compared with previous years. 20 ALTs responded to the survey. Three of these participants have also been interviewed about their experiences as well. Quotes and information from these interviews will be used in this paper. By interviewing teachers about their specific situation, more detailed information and more specific scenarios were recorded than if only a survey was used. In addition, three elementary school HRTs were interviewed about their experience teaching elementary school English. Therefore, the information gathered from this study is mostly qualitative, with quantitative data used when assessing the results of the survey, or when discussing team teaching from the perspective of an HRT.

Limitations

There are a few limitations to this study. The first major limitation is that each situation is different, with different HRTs, ALTs, and students. Something that may have worked for one HRT and ALT dynamic with team teaching might not work if either the HRT or ALT changes. In addition, the teachers that were given surveys were ALTs, and not HRTs. While there were a small selection of HRTs interviewed, the qualitative data consists solely of ALT responses. A classroom that could be considered improper team teaching to an ALT might be recognized as proper team teaching according to the HRT, and vice versa. All of the teachers are teaching in public schools placed within Osaka city, which

may have different rules and regulations than different areas of Japan. Training that is given or not given to teachers regarding team teaching may also vary according to schooling received before becoming a teacher. In addition, the English level of the HRTs will vary as well, which can affect their confidence and speaking ability when it comes to teaching English.

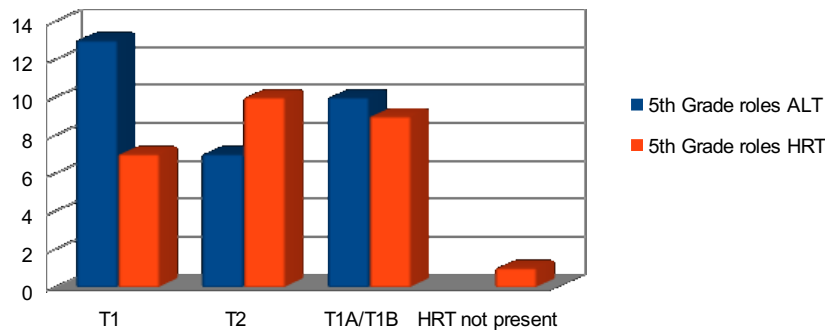
The next major limitation of the study involves the use of qualitative data, which can be helpful and provide some information on certain situations, but many of those situations are specific to that particular teacher's situation. There are no two situations that are alike, and while a teacher's commentary can provide insight on their situation, it does not necessarily reflect the norm. A different teacher using a similar method may produce very different results, therefore flaws within the results are possible.

Currently, there is no way to assess whether team teaching is being conducted properly. While students typically enjoy team-taught classes with an ALT and the presence of both a Japanese teacher and ALT is beneficial over single-teacher English classes (Galloway, 2009), there is currently no formal team teaching assessment process. There is also no reason to believe that student scores are correlated with team teacher quality. Teachers who answered that they saw a decrease in student scores and levels for the 2020 year could be falsely correlating the student scores with teacher and team teaching efficiency.

Analysis

According to responses received in the survey given to Osaka City ALTs, the majority of ALTs that teach 5th grade in elementary school often find themselves teaching as T1 (13 respondents) versus only 10 teachers who answered that they teach in a T1A and T1B situation (Figure 1). The survey allows for respondents to check all answers that apply, with six respondents giving two answers and two respondents answering that they teach as T1, T2, and T1A/B depending on their school and classroom. One respondent wrote that it “Changes from class to class.” While 10 out of 30 answered that they teach in a T1A/B situation, it makes up for only one-third of the answers, with the majority of classrooms being taught with either the ALT or the HRT as T1.

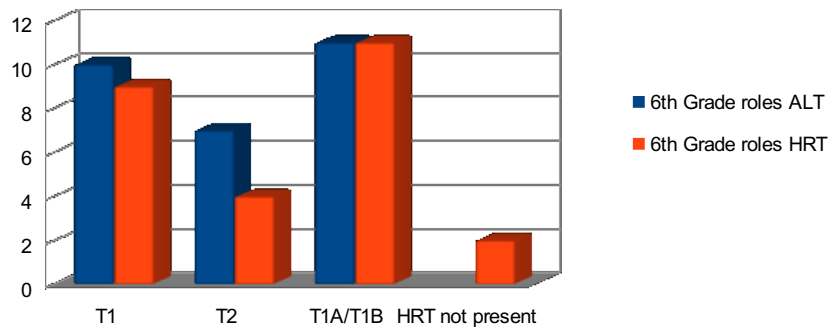
Figure 1
Teacher Roles at your School—5th Grade



The results of the same question asked about the ALT and HRT teacher roles for 6th grade classroom gives slightly different results than the 5th grade results. In the 6th grade results, the teacher dynamic of T1A/T1B was the most common answer (Figure 2). Four teachers responded with two answers, and two teachers responded answering all three. While this is an improvement in the T1A/B situation compared to the 5th grade classroom, it still shows that less than half of the 6th grade classrooms in Osaka are taught in a T1A/T1B situation, with the ALT taking the role of T1 more often than the HRT.

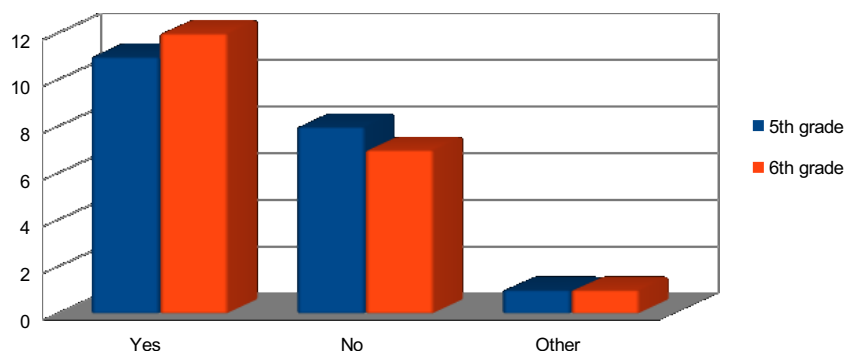
The third question asks ALTs about a noticeable difference in the quality of team teaching. Looking at only the results of the previous question as seen in Figure 1 and Figure 2 may lead the reader to believe that team teaching is not being conducted properly enough despite the changes in the curriculum from MEXT. However, when ALTs were asked whether there was a noticeable difference in the quality of team teaching when compared with previous years, 11 ALTs answered that there is a noticeable difference in the quality of team teaching with 5th grade teachers as opposed to only 8 teachers who stated that there was no difference in quality (figure 3). The same question for 6th grade teachers received 12 responses confirming a noticeable difference in team teaching with only 7 writing that they did not notice any difference this year. One respondent answered “Other,” due to the fact that they did not teach 5th and 6th grade elementary school before this year, so they did not have a base to compare it to.

Figure 2
Teacher Roles at your School—6th Grade



One respondent who said that they found a noticeable difference in team teaching when compared to last year wrote, “Teachers are becoming more confident in teaching.” Another respondent who also answered they noticed a difference wrote, “Most teachers tried hard to improve their English due to the new requirements, hence they were more active in class.” In these cases, it is possible that the new requirements given by MEXT for 5th and 6th grade English classes had a passive effect of making it easier for the HRT and ALT to work together to team teach English. In one case, the ALT wrote “I’ve gotten better at including the HRT.” which also notes an important point that the burden of proper team teaching does not rely solely on the HRT and their participation, but on the ALT as well. If the ALT is not properly working with an HRT, then they may not notice a difference even if the HRT attempts team teaching.

Figure 3
Has there been a noticeable difference in the quality of team teaching compared with previous years?

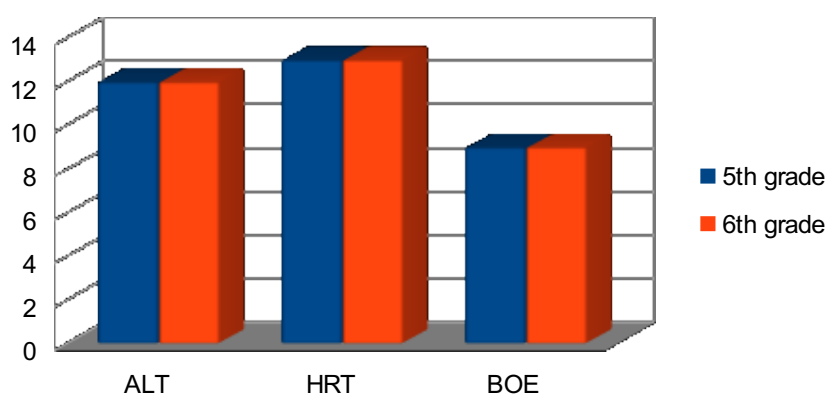


In the cases where teachers answered that there were no noticeable differences, one respondent noted that “the system and the expectations felt the same.” Another ALT wrote that “Although some teachers are trying to do more, many still rely on the [ALT].” These

responses both show a possible flaw in the system and that simply increasing the amount of classes and HRT responsibility alone is not enough to increase the teamwork and relationship between the ALT and the HRT. One respondent noted that “We work together like before, with great teamwork.” In the past, HRTs and ALTs that conducted class with good teamwork have already achieved the goal of creating a positive team teaching atmosphere for the students, and that they have not felt as though the changes have made this atmosphere better or worse. It is important to note that there is a possibility that more classes with required assessment can decrease the effect of team teaching if teacher talks and demonstration conversations are removed in place of drilling vocabulary and grammar.

Overall, the results of the survey show a positive improvement in the quality of team teaching that occurs in the elementary school 5th and 6th grade classroom. The changes made by MEXT giving homeroom teachers more responsibility and increasing class hours appears to have a correlation with the teacher relationship between the HRT and the ALT. It could be due to the increased class hours or due to the changes in the quality of the lesson plans. According to the survey, when asked who makes the lesson plans for their schools, 12 respondents wrote that the ALT makes the lesson plan, 13 respondents wrote that the HRT does, with 9 respondents answering that the Board of Education (BOE) makes the lesson plans (Figure 4). There is no overwhelming majority for who writes the lesson plans, and even changes among classes and teachers. According to these results, the person making the lesson plan does not necessarily have an effect on the whether the team teaching is properly conducted. If the lesson plan is written in a way that supports team teaching, then it will be easier to properly teach in a T1A/B manner.

Figure 4
Who Makes the Lesson Plans at your School?



After interviewing 3 elementary school HRTs about their opinions teaching by themselves and team teaching under the new MEXT 2020 guidelines, there were various answers. All three teachers agreed that the textbook is sufficient for teaching English as a subject, but the ALT often has more expertise with games and activities. If the MEXT guidelines require the HRT to carry a more prominent role in English class, then it makes sense that the materials the teachers are given are sufficient. The digital textbook was emphasized by the HRTs as being the most important aspect in English class when an ALT is not present, particularly due to the video and listening sections, which would be

very difficult for the Japanese teacher to do effectively without some form of media. This shows that with some support, even if the homeroom teacher is not experienced in teaching English, they can still teach the class, and are not as reliant on the ALT as in previous years. As many ALT participants have noted in their survey, the HRT who are more comfortable teaching English are more engaged in teaching with the ALT, and it shows that not only the new guidelines, but the materials given to the HRT are also very important. When the HRT is no longer reliant on the ALT, this transitions into team-taught classes, where the HRT is more aware of the material as well as what is going on in the class, and can therefore help students and contribute more to the demonstration of activities.

From the side of the Japanese teachers, when it comes to explaining and demonstrating cultural differences, the ALT has experience living in other countries, therefore many students view this as ALT's job (Johannes, 2012). The Japanese teacher can use their own knowledge and talk about other countries, but ultimately cultural differences are one part of the English class where ALTs can contribute in ways that the Japanese teacher may be unable to. However, one teacher stated that in the digital textbook for the 2020 book "Here We Go!", there are many videos and a lot of information about other cultures and differences that can give students some insight into other cultures. In this sense, even without the ALT present, the digital materials have allowed the Japanese teacher to even teach cultural differences. Nunan (2003) has concluded that proper materials can help compensate for the lack of fluency and skill in English. HRTs who try to use their own lack of English knowledge as an excuse for not participating in English class should no longer have to worry as long as materials and lesson plans provide a sufficient amount of material that can be used to teach.

Suggestions for Improving Team Teaching

While the results show an improvement in team teaching, it is far from being a perfect system. There are classrooms where either the ALT, HRT, or both have difficulty in conducting an ideal team teaching environment. One proposal given by a respondent in regards to ways to improve team teaching is by encouraging the HRT to take the role of an ideal student, which is the third main role an HRT can play. The ALT said that when their homeroom teacher took the role of an ideal student, it gave the students more motivation to learn. They stated that many HRTs do not know that this is an acceptable scenario, so they often try not to participate in fear of interrupting the ALT. Nao (2011) says that even advanced learners have a difficult time understanding native English, which has a variety of pronunciations, accents, and dialects. It is therefore an unrealistic goal for Japanese students to become as fluent as a native speaker, but rather by using the HRT as a more realistic goal for students, students will be less likely to give up due to the issue of an unattainable goal. In addition, other ALTs have stated that when the Japanese teacher is present and team teaching with the ALT, then the classes are easier to teach. One respondent stated, "[The Homeroom Teachers] know their students and can really help steer the class in the right direction." For these reasons, when the ALT is not placed as the sole T1 in a classroom, then the classes tend to go better overall than when the HRT is a solo T1, which can contribute to the importance and relevance of team teaching.

Another suggestion for improving team teaching given by an ALT is by organizing meetings between the two teachers that will be conducting a class together. When the ALT and JTE/HRT are both fully aware of the lesson plan, the activities, and the roles that they

should take in the classroom, it is easier to teach together and take advantage of the roles that each teacher will play. The ALT respondent said, “If the HRT asked the ALT for feedback and ideas before the class rather than ideas for improvement after the class finished, it would be easier to implement those ideas and teach together.” This is one issue that at a face value, seems simple to implement, but in practice, time and languages-ability are issues. In a study by Ohtani (2010), Japanese teachers reported that the ALT is not always able to fully communicate in Japanese, and the Japanese teacher does not feel as though they are able to fully communicate in English. Planning and discussing lessons takes a lot of time as well, especially if there are ideas being discussed and lesson plans being edited. Particularly at elementary school, the HRTs are not experts in English, and may lack the ability to communicate properly with an ALT. While some ALTs can speak Japanese, there are also many who have no Japanese language ability. This is especially true for JET Programme ALTs who are not required to have a degree related to Japan, or Japanese language skills (Eligibility, 2020). In such cases, the ALT often becomes T1, despite less than 15% holding a degree in an education-related field (Browne, 2008). In other cases, the Japanese teacher may worry that the ALT does not understand the Japanese educational system, and therefore the teachers may have a difficult time working together if they cannot understand each others’ viewpoint. Despite this, if there is proper communication and time allotted, consistent meetings are a good way for ALTs and HRTs to work together to discuss a lesson before the class and understand their expectations of each other.

One other issue with team teaching is the amount of training received for team teaching for both ALTs and HRTs. Training for many ALTs in Japan consists of practicing working with another teacher, and practicing methods for doing proper demonstrations. However, for JET Programme ALTs, due to the results of the job acceptance coming only months before they come to Japan, there is very little time to properly prepare these workers for working in a Japanese school with a Japanese teacher. There are multiple training sessions each year, which are for the improvement of teaching skills, but an ALT respondent described those sessions as “too little, too late”. When the Japanese homeroom teachers were questioned about their team teaching training, most responded that they have never had any training regarding team teaching. This difference could be one reason why many Japanese teachers often do not understand what team teaching really is, or what the goal is.

With English becoming an official subject for homeroom teachers in elementary school, Japanese teacher training could be a potential solution that helps teachers properly understand their role in the classroom. Without training regarding team teaching, there will continue to be issues with team teaching, as the Japanese teachers cannot be expected to know something that they were not trained to do. According to a study by Machida (2016), HRTs require support and training in order for them to gain the skills necessary to work with an ALT without problems. With proper guidance, practice, and materials, an HRT should not feel as though the English that is being taught is something beyond their own capabilities. Therefore, one of the main difficulties that HRTs often cite when discussing working with an ALT can be negated, and more focus can be placed on conducting classes in a setting that benefits the students in an optimal fashion. A longer period of training for ALTs in order to assure that they understand the Japanese education system and that they understand what team teaching is, and how to properly conduct it should become a requirement for ALTs across the country.

Conclusion

While there have been cases of improvement in the team teaching dynamic between public school ALTs and HRTs, there does not seem to be any noticeable difference due to the increase in the number of English classes at elementary school. Even in cases where HRTs are teaching by themselves and are more familiar with the material, many ALTs still find their classes being taught in a T1 and T2 fashion rather than a T1A and T1B fashion. Therefore, the issue with proper elementary school team teaching is not solely due to teaching experience or English ability. One proposed solution is consistent meetings, but this solution faces some difficulties due to language barriers and time constraints. The most optimal solution for the issue is to provide more training for both ALTs and HRTs in the field of team teaching, and giving the teachers many opportunities throughout the year to practice issues they may face. A lack of training among ALTs and HRTs is a major obstacle in the way of proper team teaching being implemented in elementary schools across the country. Until some steps are taken specifically for the purpose of increasing the team teaching ability of ALTs and HRTs, the present issues with team teaching are unlikely to change or improve.

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